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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate how literature and literacy could merge, what effect immersion in a particular type of literature had on the writing and oral stories the children were producing, and what effect spontaneous talk and storymaking had on the classroom literacy process. Each day for 8 weeks, 10 fifth-grade students met separately with a teacher/researcher during their regular 60-minute reading class. The 8-week session was divided into three parts: fiction and journal writing, poetry, and fiction and oral storytelling. Each session was tape recorded and transcribed to review what had happened and to see what unplanned events took the class in different directions and why. Results indicated that storytelling enabled children to produce meaning in their primary language at the same time they were formulating ideas. As a result, personal identity was able to shape, as well as be shaped by, the classroom setting when home and school cultures were successfully merged, and when talents of analogical thinking and reasoning and experience in group literacy events were tapped. Storymaking allowed the children to shape meaning from their experiences at the same time they were producing meaning, without first having to slow down the narrative momentum and lose half the story. Storymaking fostered a sociocentric classroom environment that in turn engendered more talk and storytelling. Storymaking became a pedagogical influence in itself. (Twenty-eight references are attached.) (MG)

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CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE CLASSROOM LITERACY PROGRAM:

THE POWER OF CHILDREN'S STORYMAKING

Presentation for AERA Annual Meeting, Boston, April 20, 1990

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CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE CLASSROOM LITERACY PROGRAM:

THE POWER OF CHILDREN'S STORYMAKING

Several years ago, as I was reading Edward Hall's anthropological study, Beyond Culture (1981), I was intrigued by the statement that "white Americans are captives of their own time and space system," a "monochronic" (versus a "polychronic") conceptual frame that seemed related in several ways to two styles of learning (analytical and relational) identified by Cohen (1969).

Cohen's theories seemed to have direct bearing on pedagogy for the classroom literacy program: first, that an analytical, cognitive style is likely to arise when children participate "in structured families in 'formal' styles of group organization" [monochronic], whereas a relational style is more likely to be seen in children from more "fluid families" [polychronic] (Hale Benson, 37), and second, that those who function with relational styles are more creative in the arts, and since Black children are exposed to a high degree of stimulation in the creative arts (growing out of the African heritage and the expressive "performer styles" of the Black community), their learning style is likely to be relational in nature.

At this time, not long after Shirley Brice Heath had studied the different voices of Trackton, Roadville, and Maintown children in a Western North Carolina community, I found myself as a classroom researcher studying the language and literacy patterns of ten children, fifth graders, in the Eastern part of the same state. Eight of the students were working class black children; two were working class white children. All had been designated as low average achievers in diagnostic reading tests.

Since Heath (1982) had said that schools did not utilize the talents of such children, and Rosen (1984) had indicated that schools needed to incorporate more

narrative events in the classroom, I wondered what would happen if children's storymaking were not only encouraged in a classroom situation, but cultivated. If story or narrative were, in Hardy's words, "a primary act of mind" (1975), storytelling in the classroom might enable children to explore more fully their own cultural experiences and enable me to learn more too. As Hall notes, "in the absence of knowledge concerning the nature of an organism, it is impossible to properly develop that organism to its greatest potential."

For eight weeks, I met separately with these ten children during their regular sixty minute reading class (forty hours of instructional time), and each day the children read, or heard, literature, after which they wrote freely in journals and then shared journal entries with one another. I wanted to see how, in a classroom setting, literature and literacy could merge; in particular I wanted to investigate what effect immersion in a particular type of literature had on the writing and oral stories the children were producing, and what effect spontaneous talk and storymaking had on the classroom literacy process.

Each day, as we began with literature sharing and storytelling excursions, writing time became often oral composition time as well. And when I began to realize that with spontaneous storymaking experiences, students were often composing stories arranged around the life and death experiences of pets (translating their own personal experiences into dramatic form as Labov (1972) says, in order to appraise that life experience), I began incorporating more planned opportunities for storymaking to emerge.

Also, based on evidence that researchers such as Cummins (1986) have produced, that students approach learning tasks more effectively through their native language (which, in conjunction with prior experience, fosters the development of thought processes), I encouraged the children to compose and transmit their ideas in the language they brought from home.

I tape recorded each class session and transcribed each day's events on that

particular day, in order to review more completely what had happened and to see what unplanned events took us off in different directions--and why. In addition, each child had a personal tape, and the children could record (for themselves or with a partner) stories and play back stories at any time, in order to investigate what the stories were telling them about themselves and their learning process.

I divided the eight week session into three parts: fiction in which journal writing was part of the child character's ongoing experience and an integrated part of the story, as with E. B. White's The Trumpet of the Swan, poetry, and fiction in which storytelling was incorporated as part of the narrative line, as in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books. And because I followed a basic plan of genre divisions, I was able to see, as the weeks passed, that the child's creation was influenced by the various types of literature the child was hearing. Children often used their journals as the characters in the fiction did (to express anger, excitement, or puzzlement, or to reproduce, or keep a record of, a special moment); they utilized word patterns, line arrangements, and subjects poets used; they told stories as they listened to fiction in which embedded stories were part of the plot.

Thus there was strong evidence that children did explore literary devices, subjects, and genre, after exposure to poetry and fiction, and that their explorations could be classified as stylistic, functional, and thematic borrowing. (See Mikkelsen, 1984a, 1984b, 1986, for a description of literary modes that children internalize and consciously or unconsciously imitate in their oral and written stories following exposure to folktales: retelling, borrowing, recreation, blending, and transformation.) And because of the increased amount of storytelling in which the children were involved, storying served as both rehearsal for writing, as well as a reason for writing--and more storying--to emerge, with literature most often serving as the springboard for story creation.

Making Life Out of Literature

A chain of spontaneous storytelling began one day after I read a passage from Alan Garner's Elidor that included the phrase, "the smell of cat." The phrase seemed strange, so I stopped to ask, "Do cats have a noticable odor?" The children's responses were an explosion of cat stories, and these stories in turn caused Deena, sick at home the following day, to begin writing a story about her own cat's poisoning, a story that in the next weeks released more of her memories and more stories about all of her cats.

When Tonette also decided to create a cat book and asked if she and Deena could work together, their writing became a collaborative effort. And Deena's subsequent request, that anyone having a pet story should submit it for their book, elicited a story from Cory that helped me to see more about him and his learning style, at the same time it showed me what he was discovering about his own life. Originally told in a small group setting (and unrecorded), then retold at the tape recorder, Cory's first telling may have served well as rehearsal for the second story.

Several intricate structural and stylistic features (a shaped or reshaped design) are apparent here, as well as very possibly some borrowed features of peer stories. A week before, Hattie and Deena had told about their pets' eyes turning colors, and Hattie had told of her cat having a special chair. And these details might have either caused Cory to remember his dog's eyes or his special chair for the dog, and to include such details, with the conscious or unconscious intention of providing elements to which his audience could understand or identify--or to imagine them, for the same reason. In either case, they produce for the reader a more visual scene, and the story thus communicates Cory's ideas more effectively.

"When I was four years old," Cory began, "I had a dog named Lady.

She was white, small, had blue eyes that sometimes would change colors, like green or red. I liked to play with her a lot, but I liked to throw rocks at her too. And then my mother said, 'How come you hit that precious dog?' I said, 'I don't know.' And she took me, she got ready to spank me. And Lady comes in there and barks at my mother and jumps at her like she doesn't want me to get a spanking. That's why I loved Lady.

My mother took me and she was going to spank me again. But Lady came in there and barked at my mother, and I looked at Lady. And she looked at me and her eyes changed color. But I still liked to throw rocks at her. And I would play with her. And I was sitting on the porch and I had her on my lap and I was cuffing her on the head. And she got mad cause I had hit her on the head too hard. And I started throwing rocks at her again. And she kind of glared like, and I kind of glared like. And then I jumped on the floor and I hugged her.

And I had this chair and it was a pretty chair. So I gave it to Lady because not too many people sit in it, cause it was mine, and I didn't let nobody but Lady sit in it. I let my brother sit in it but nobody but my brother and my dog Lady. I loved her very much. And I gave her that chair and she didn't let anyone sit in it. The only person she let sit in it was me. And me and her sit together and that's why I loved Lady, cause she was nice to me and I was nice to her.

And she was nice when I kept throwing rocks at her. She still kept saving me from getting a spanking. And so I just stopped throwing rocks. And I took her out on the porch and I patted her on the head. And I held her. And I help her on my lap hugging her, and her eyes started turning green and red. And she started smiling.

And I was playing ball with her. I threw the ball at a tree. And it bounced back and hit the street. And it went out in the street. This dude was coming by in a Trans Am and it hit Lady cause Lady ran out there and tried to get the ball. The car ran over her. And she was crushed. And that's why I ain't got Lady right now--to this very day. I ain't got Lady anymore.

Important here is the external shaping Cory brings to bear on the listener's understanding. Notice that Cory says he does not know why he wanted to hit the dog (he does not understand the conflicting emotions that produced the tension of responsibility and irresponsibility). But there is also a great deal of interpretation both in his causal statements ("that's why I loved Lady," "she got mad cause I had hit her," and "it hit Lady cause Lady ran out there") and in the movement of the story from a recounting of innocent and culpable actions (he says he does not know why he hits her) to more responsible ones ("And me and her sit together and that's why I loved Lady, cause she was nice to me and I was nice to her").

Borrowing elements of peer stories (animals' eyes changing color and a pet having a special chair) also enables Cory to characterize both himself and Lady more effectively. Notice what Cory achieves in his transposition of Hattie's story of her cat. Her story, told directly after she heard the passage from Elidor, reveals an aggressive and possessive cat (Hattie's word is "mean") whose eyes appear to control or intimidate others with their color:

> I used to have a whole bunch of cats. I used to have a Siamese cat and she was mean. She had her own chair and if someone came over there she wouldn't let anyone sit in it. We just gave it to her and if someone came over there, she wouldn't let anyone sit in it. We cut a cardboard box, put some dirt in it, and put it in the bathroom, and when she had to use the bathroom, if you go in there, and you close the door and you come out, her eyes would turn red. And she would look at you really strange with those red eyes and say, 'bout time you get out of there.' Cause she was mean.

Cory converts this trait of "meanness" in two ways: Lady's eyes change color at those times when she is trying to teach Cory something or to show him that she loves him and that he should reciprocate that love (paragraph two). Lady's chair is given to her by Cory to signify his love for her, and he does not allow anyone to sit in it except those closest to her (paragraph three), significantly also those whom he intimidates or tries to control, as an older brother and as owner

of the dog.

If this borrowing is occurring on an unconscious level, the transferred elements enable Cory to characterize more effectively the affection he and Lady feel for one another. And this characterization, as in any good piece of fiction, helps to convey more easily the conflict and theme of the story. If he is borrowing from peer stories (if the details of eye color and chair ownership are not simply coincidence), and if he is utilizing details of peer stories without conscious knowledge that he is doing so, his reason may not be simply to tell a better story (craft a more effective storyline). It might be part of the complex internal shaping that he is bringing to bear on his own meaning making process as well.

Notice the intricate story frame of boy and dog which encases a five part series of polarities or dualities and in turn provides both narrative cohesion and movement. In paragraph one of the story, for example, the boy teases the dog, the mother reprimands the boy, the dog saves the boy, the boy loves the dog (boy-dog; mother-boy; dog-boy; boy-dog). Paragraph two is a retelling of paragraph one; at the same time it reveals the growing relationship of boy and dog. Paragraph three is a digression about the dog's chair which serves to emphasize the strong love of boy and dog. Significantly it is followed by paragraph four, a circular regression into irresponsibility (he reverts to rock throwing). The dog still keeps saving him however.

Then there is a sharper reversal: "So I just stopped throwing rocks," followed by the "conversion" scene: he hugs the dog and the dog smiles at him. At last he has gained control, taken a step toward more mature behavior (stopped treating the dog as a toy and more like the caring, living creature that it is). Paragraph five contains the fatal irony (just as the boy begins to change, the dog, because of its loyalty, is hit by a car and killed). The last two statements ("I ain't got Lady") played out against the entire story, show the boy alone now with the memory of the dog (Cory telling to remember).

Speaking of the binary patterns that Iser (1978) says represent the "minimal

organizational unit in all processes of comprehension" (197), Culler (1975) has said that "binary oppositions can be used to order the most heterogenous elements" and he further explains why "binarism is so pervasive in literature:

> when two things are set in opposition to one another the reader is forced to explore qualitative similarities and differences, to make a connection so as to derive meaning from the disjunction (15).

The "connection" here, in the polarity of the boy's actions and the adult's "justice" (id and superego), is the dog's self denying affection which holds the two in balance (the dog saves the boy but also teaches him--glares at him), just as simultaneously another binary pattern (and connection) is operating: the dog's loyalty, the result of its affection, holds the boy's self control and loss of it in balance, at least until an outside force appears unexpectedly and tips the balance. The dog is killed.

Cory sees the car as the most immediate cause for the dog's death, but the story structure and shape (the inner circular details he has chosen for the telling) also reveal that he sees another underlying cause: the dog's love and loyalty which always cause the dog to put the boy first. In telling his story, and especially telling it as he does (showing an ability to interpret his own behavior and that of the dog), he shows that he has achieved something very important for any spiraling passage to a more mature state: he has accepted responsibility for his own actions. Such acceptance does not necessarily resolve all tension or conflicts. Losing control brings with it a fascinating power, and he seesaws back to that power repeatedly in the story. But in shouldering the responsiblity of telling the story, he is able both to face his guilt and to attain a more sensitive awareness of these sometimes unmanageable and conflicting tendencies to lose control. Placed beside the record of Cory's other classroom stories (Mikkelsen, 1989), this one reveals his ongoing struggle to submit to and conquer the "monster" he alternately fears and desires becoming.

In telling a story, in reshaping his experiences to make a meaningful design of them so that he examines more closely his own personal value constructs and

thus clarifies them, Cory also revelas more about the cultural constructs he is exploring--and clarifying--with language as his tool. Here both the story structure and shape reveal that one way an American cultural child may be adjusting to the larger Western culture in which he lives is through internalizing the language and literature of this wider world. As Roger Abrahams (1970) has identified and compared African/Afro American and Western musical styles, the former is characterized by circular organization, repetition of sound and movement for involving listeners, short units leading to a succession of mini climaxes, retreat from closure, and the latter by linear progression and movement driving toward closure, with repetition used only for intensifying tension. Interestingly, however, Cory's story manages to incorporate elements of both these styles. The tension of polarities (conscience, and mischief, irresponsibility and self awareness) move back and forth with a series of mini climaxes that work to involve and increase the tension and to delay closure), as they are held within the larger frame of a life and death plot that is, at the same time, moving subtly toward closure.

In enumerating the basic assumptions Hilliard (1976) has made concerning human behavioral styles, Hale-Benson states that the analytic and the relational styles are extreme ends of a continuum and that a "'gifted' person is one who has integrated and harmonized the different styles within himself or herself to focus one harmonized style" (44). If, as she also says, "styles are the framework from which one views the world," then we might assume looking at Cory's story that he is somehow forming an integrated view of the world or perhaps that storying is helping him to form this integrated view, helping him to sort out the incongruities, helping him to create in his story structure a way to integrate two opposing styles, polarities of which can be seen in many of the story situations the other children constructed.

Hilliard (1976) for example defines these analytical and relational categories by describing them oppositionally: fact driven versus theme or idea driven; logical versus phychic (compare Bruner's logico-scientific versus narrative modes of language transmission and learning and Heath's study of Maintown and Trackton children and

their different propensities toward the expository versus the narrative modes); egocentric versus sociocentric, convergent and divergent, controlled/expressive, direct/indirect (compare Hall's notion of high and low context cultures), linear/patterned (compare Hall's notion of monochronic and polychronic time schemes), isolated/integrated, constant/evolving, mechanistic (thing centered) versus humanistic or people centered (41). And these two ends of the continuum I saw often played out in the interactions of Deena and Tonette.

When they were both working on books about cats, for example, the need for Tonette to collaborate was social (she wrote and talked about the pleasure of sitting beside Deena and having a writing partner, and she wrote notes to Deena about their friendship). Any need that Deena had for a collaboration, in contrast, appeared to be largely egocentric; she wanted to be a good writer (she often stated that soon she would be sending her book off to a publisher). She said that she and Tonette could each read cat books and find things about cats to put in their book, and she encouraged other class members to contribute stories and poem to the book.

Egocentrism, however, soon crowded out sociocentrism. After Tonette wrote several chapters for the book, Deena suddenly took the book home one day and continued to keep it there. And when she finally made it clear that there would be no final collaboration, Tonette went on to make her own cat book, not the one she worked on with Deena, but a Garfield activity book, with jokes and cartoons she created (recreated) from the comic strips/cartoon books about Garfield that she liked so well. And again her interest for herself, as creator, as well as her interest for an audience was primarily sociocentric; the book was one that others were drawn into reading for the pleasure of social participation.

Making Literature Out of Literature

The same contrast in learning styles could be seen in the way the children discussed a poem Cory brought to place in Deena's cat book (Sandburg's "Fog"), the week before he told his story of Lady. Cory's question for the children,

"What do you see when I'm reading this poem?" elicited several embryonic stories in peer conversation that day:

Rob: I saw fog on little cat's feet.
Cory: Lightly, on little cat's feet?
Rob: Yeah.
Deena: Did you know that a cat could light up its eyes all colors?
Hattie: A dog can too. My dog, named Bear, when the light hit his pupils, his eyes turn green.
Deena: Just like my cat's eyes turned green in the middle just like that. Different cats light up different colors.
Mona: I've got an aunt, her eyes turn green, yellow, blue. They just turn color. They just turn. When she wears different colors, they just turn different colors.
Hattie: Is your aunt a cat?
Mona: No, her eyes just be turning. Her color eyes glow. She's in the bed when she's sleeping. Her eyes, sometimes her eyes sparkle in the nighttime. I get up and run!

Notice that Deena and Rob, the two non minority children of the class, are, at least in this instance, the more fact or information driven participants; whereas Mona and Hattie are the more story or meaning driven. Hattie becomes diverted almost immediately into personal expressiveness, telling the name of her dog, describing his eyes (not for any technical reason, as with Deena, to convey facts), so that her listeners <u>see</u> Bear (or so that she "re-sees" him as she tells). Then she makes a play on words about Mona's aunt (she seems to see and shape meaning herself metaphorically). Mona's words about her cat-like aunt, in turn, produce lines as strong, colorful, and rhythmically patterned as a poetry produces.

<u>Making Literature Out of Life</u>

Literature was not always the direct, or even the indirect, stimulus for storytelling. Sometimes life experiences conversely produced stories, like those of Cory, that functioned as a twin "branch" of children's literature in the classroom--a child's "literature," often quite strong in its natural, seamless, and sociocentric state. One day when the children had just returned form a class trip to an historic town nearby, I asked them to tell me about their day, and the result was a burst of excited talk, and once again, several examples of a differences in analytical/

relational learning styles. Notice Rob's concentration on external events and the emphasis of the others on inner feelings and personal actions.

Mona: Donny got left on the boat!
Rob: We saw where a tornado went through the woods.
Annie: We were talking we might die or something like that on the bus . . .
Hattie: We went to a graveyard and I was scared.
Mona: Me and Cory was dancing on the grave . . .
Shawn: A house we went to was built in the 1700's and the two women lived there . . .

Many seeds of stories were apparent here, preoccupations with danger and death, history and old things, fears of being left behind, and each contributed to the steady stream of oral narrative the children were producing as a group story. Even when they moved into writing that day, Deena was writing a report of the day's events and Rob was producing facts about the Governor's house; whereas Hattie, Tonette, and Jana were producing among themselves (although unintentionally) an integrated, expressive story.

As they sat around the table writing, they often glanced at one another's journals,and what they saw crept subtly into the style and function of their entries. Hattie was writing about the old house, the flowers around it, "dark like velvet, yellow and purple," and saying about the "old clock" in the house ("around 200 hundred years old"), "I couldn't believe that clock was still ticking!"

"Bath, it was surely boring!" was, conversely, the way Tonette began her story. Then reading both responses, Jana produced her own humorous synthesis, in verse form:

Bath, N.C. is a nice place to be
When we were there we saw wonderful things
Things so ancient, things so old!
Some were getting very bored.

Mona at this point was writing nothing. Fiercely independent, yet supremely underconfident at times, she often rejected the sociocentric behavior of her friends; yet her more relational learning style, at the same time, prevented her from taking on a more egocentric stance toward her work. So she often closed up when the others talked or merely played at writing when they wrote. I sensed from the talk that day that she really wanted to tell about Cory dancing on the grave at Bath, and so, when I encouraged her to let me imagine it, she began spinning her own story--of Tonette

ringing the church bell and Mrs. Hill saying it was time to go, of Cory saying "I wonder if Michael Jackson came out here and started doing 'Thriller,' I wonder what all these dead people would do," of Cory calling out, "Watch this! I'm going to dance on the grave. And he did!" Mona exclaimed. "Then it was time for us to go. So we danced onto the bus and got in."

Cory danced a little to show me then (to fill in the blank space of Mona's story). But only a little. This day he pulled back, told no story, did not even write anything. Instead he sat quietly by as supportive, sociocentric listener, helping Mona to tell hers (sat basking, in the egocentric joy of his own performance. He was the story). In bringing his own special fantasy to life that day in Bath, Cory was telling a story--another kind of story in which movement became language. Dancing (motion, gesture) told his story, just as metaphor (Cory as the 'Thriller' monster) became the supporting structure of plot.

Conclusions

In story "products," such as Cory's, I saw an energy, a vibrant, expressive tone that I might not have seen had I been working with a group of children for which the analytical style was the majority "rule." In such a setting, children like Cory, Tonette, Mona, Jana, and Hattie, might have been less apt to exhibit their own expressive styles; their cultural uniqueness might easily have been suppressed, or entirely silenced. Their analytical products might easily have outshown the relational ones, had I been adhering to expectations of a traditional curriculum.

What then did storytelling--or storymaking--in the classroom achieve? First, it enabled children to produce meaning in their primary language, at the same time they were formulating ideas, without first having to translate this conversational language into something more formal and acceptable to mainstream values. As a result, personal identity was able to shape, as well as

be shaped by, the classroom setting, when home and school cultures were successfully merged, and talents of analogical ("relational") thinking and reasoning and experience in group literacy events were tapped.

Second, storymaking allowed the children to shape meaning from their experiences, at the same time they were producing meaning, without first having to slow down the narrative momentum and lose half the story (while hand caught up with mind or the fear of formal rules--the terror of the printed word--inhibited the unconscious "stream" of thought).

Third, storymaking fostered a sociocentric classroom environment that in turn engendered more talk and storytelling (maintained the narrative flow). The classroom was filled more often with children conversing with one another than with children listening to an adult talking. And their talk was often a strong motivation for storytelling and meaning making, or a bridge from literature to literacy (Mikkelsen, 1989).

Ultimately cultural constructs were able to enrich rather than to limit a classroom setting, and I began to see the way an alternative cultural learning style could produce an alternative teaching style for classrooms of both mainstream, as well as non mainstream children, a style that seeks to cultivate children's storymaking as a tool for self discovery and a third literacy, a way we "read" ourselves into understanding of the world, as well as a way to "write" a new version of the world we are trying to see.

Thus storymaking became a pedagogical influence in itself. I did not teach children to tell stories or how to tell better stories or how to write stories or how to turn oral stories into written ones. I gave them the opportunity to talk and tell stories as often as possible and this enabled analytical children to observe and then test the waters of storytelling and relational children to refine their storytelling talents. In the process they exposed their classmates to a narrative tradition missing in the regular classroom day and began to notice an area in which they excelled.

If it is true that "gifted" people are those who have successfully integrated different learning styles within themselves, then it is very likely that there will be no truly gifted chidlren until we have allowed minority children to share and extend their talents with classmates who have a great deal to learn from them. Minority students have a great deal to contribute to the language development of non minority students. If pedagogic strategies for literacy instruction are revised to build on, rather than to exclude cultural differences, all students will benefit.

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